

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN CALIFORNIA: A QUICK OVERVIEW

Who are Homeless Youth?

- There is not a single, consistent definition of “homeless youth” among federal statutes; there are different definitions – and age ranges – for social services, education, and housing programs.
- In California, the term “homeless youth” generally refers to unaccompanied minors ages 12 through 17 who are living apart from their parents or legal guardians – and young adults ages 18 through 24 who are economically and/or emotionally detached from their families – and are experiencing homelessness or living in unstable or inadequate living situations. Such living situations include sleeping on friends’ couches, staying in shelters, and living under bridges, in abandoned buildings, and on the streets.
- The homeless youth population includes **runaway minors** who have left home for one or more nights without permission; **expelled youth** who are told to leave home, are abandoned or deserted, or are prevented from returning home; and **systems youth** who have aged out of foster care or been released from juvenile justice or other public systems with nowhere to go.

- Some youth are homeless for brief periods of time. In comparison, more than half of **street youth** – those who spend a significant amount of time in areas that increase their risk for sexual abuse, exploitation, and drug abuse and are generally not connected with services – are homeless for two to nine years.¹

Why Are Youth Homeless?

- Youth overwhelmingly cite family conflict and breakdown – commonly abuse or neglect, alcohol or drug addiction of a family member, pregnancy, and rejection over sexual orientation – as the major reason for their homelessness or episodes of running away.²
- Many youth in foster care, juvenile justice, and/or mental health systems become homeless when they transition out without the support and opportunities for housing and employment they need. Nationally, estimates of former foster youth who become homeless are generally 20 percent or greater.³ In California, one in four emancipated youth are homeless.⁴

Basic Characteristics

- Age and gender characteristics are related

to whether the youth surveyed are staying in shelters or are on the street. Youth in shelters tend to include either equal numbers of males and females or more females; they also tend to be younger. Street youth are more likely to be male and are typically older.⁵ In addition, shelter youth are typically homeless for the first time and have not been homeless very long. Street youth are generally homeless on a more frequent basis and for longer periods of time.⁶

- While some research indicates that racial and ethnic minorities are over-represented in the homeless youth population, other studies indicate that homeless youth generally reflect the ethnic makeup of their local community.⁷
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth are over-represented in the homeless youth population; estimates range from seven percent among youth receiving services to 39 percent among street youth.⁸ LGBT youth leave home more frequently and are exposed to more victimization while on the streets compared to heterosexual homeless youth.⁹
- A significant percentage of homeless youth are pregnant or are parents; homeless youth are three times as likely as national samples of youth to be pregnant, to have impregnated someone, or to already be a parent.¹⁰

Consequences of Youth Homelessness: Risky Behaviors & Victimization

Being on their own without adult supervision, homeless youth are likely to behave in ways that are unsafe; they are also especially vulnerable. Homelessness exacerbates or can lead to serious mental

and physical health problems.

- Chronic health conditions, including asthma, other lung problems, tuberculosis, diabetes, hepatitis, and HIV/AIDS are prevalent among homeless youth. These youth are also at high risk for sexually transmitted diseases.¹¹
- Homeless youth (especially street youth) show an elevated risk of mental health problems, including anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide due to increased exposure to violence while living on the street.¹²
- Homeless youth also have high rates of substance use; 30 to 40 percent of homeless youth report alcohol problems in their lifetime, and 40 to 50 percent report drug problems.¹³
- Homeless youth are far more likely to be physically or sexually victimized than their peers who are not homeless, and many homeless youth are victimized repeatedly.¹⁴
- Homeless youth who engage in illegal activities (like stealing, dealing drugs, and prostitution) often report that they do so to obtain money for food and shelter. In addition, many youth report regular encounters with law enforcement that result in being ticketed for offenses that accompany homelessness, such as sleeping on the streets. This results in fines that the youth cannot pay and subsequent criminal records.¹⁵

How Many Homeless Youth Are There?

Determining the number of homeless youth is difficult and estimates vary depending upon the definition and methodology used. For example, homeless youth are highly

mobile and often try hard to avoid detection and contact with adults and social service systems; this means they are often not counted during annual homeless surveys.

- **National Estimates:** Based on national survey and other data, between 1.6 and 2.1 million youth ages 12-24 are homeless over the course of a year, including:¹⁶
 - **Ages 12 to 17:** from 1.6 to 1.7 million over a year. About 300,000 to 400,000 youth might be expected to be homeless on a single day.
 - **Ages 18 to 19:** about 80,000 to 170,000 over a year; about 22,000 to 44,000 (or five percent of the homeless population) on a single day.
 - **Ages 20 to 24:** about 124,000 to 236,000 over a year; about 31,000 to 59,000 (or seven percent of the homeless population) on a single day.

- **State Estimates:** While the actual number of youth who experience homelessness in California is unknown, here is what we do know:

- Federally-funded runaway and homeless youth (RHY) programs provided about 81,000 services, ranging from shelter beds to street outreach contacts, during 2008-09.¹⁷ Many more homeless youth in the state did not receive RHY services.
- Based on the national survey estimates and California's youth population, it is likely that 200,000 youth under the age of 18, and thousands of 18-24 year olds, are homeless for one or more days during a year.¹⁸

To learn more about youth homelessness in California, visit the **California Homeless Youth Project** at <http://cahomelessyouth.library.ca.gov> and the **California Coalition for Youth** at www.calyouth.org

1 M.R. Burt, Understanding Homeless Youth: Numbers, Characteristics, Multisystem Involvement, and Intervention Options, Testimony given before the U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, June 19, 2007. <http://www.urban.org/publications/901087.html>.

2 A.L. Fernandes, Runaway and Homeless Youth: Demographics, Programs, and Emerging Issues, Congressional Research Service, January 2007, <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/general/detail/1451>.

3 Human Rights Watch, My So-Called Emancipation: From Foster Care to Homelessness for California Youth, May 2010, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2010/05/12/my-so-called-emancipation-0>.

4 Administrative Office of the Courts, Beyond the Bench XVIII: Access and Fairness, 2007, Center for Families, Children & the Courts, Judicial Council of California.

5 A.L. Fernandes, Runaway and Homeless Youth; P. Toro and others, Homeless Youth in the United States: Recent Research Findings and Intervention Approaches, 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research, <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/toro/index.htm>.

6 A.L. Fernandes, Runaway and Homeless Youth; P. Toro and others, Homeless Youth in the United States.

7 M.R. Burt, Understanding Homeless Youth; A.L. Fernandes, Runaway and Homeless Youth; and P. Toro and others, Homeless Youth in the United States.

8 N.S. Quintana and others, On the Streets: The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Youth, American Progress, June 2010, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/06/pdf/lgbtyouthhomelessness.pdf>; M.R. Burt, Understanding Homeless Youth.

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- 15 N. Bernstein and L. Foster, Voices From the Street: A Survey of Homeless Youth by Their Peers, March 2008, California Research Bureau, <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/08/08-004.pdf>.
- 16 M.R. Burt, Understanding Homeless Youth.
- 17 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau; NEO-RHYMIS, <https://extranet.acf.hhs.gov/rhymis/>.
- 18 This estimate is based on applying California's proportion of the national youth population (12 percent) to national estimates of homeless youth. The John Burton Foundation and the California Coalition for Youth, Too Big to Ignore: Youth Homelessness in California, cover letter, November 2009, <http://www.cahomelessyouth.org/pdf/Too%20Big%20to%20Ignore.pdf>.

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